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THE Ne'er-Do-Well

By
REX BEACH

Author of
"The Spoilers," "The Barrier,"
"The Silver Horde," Etc.

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(Continued from yesterday.)

Kirk reflected that he had found not only the right place, but also fitting company for his vigil.

"What does a person do in that case?" he asked.

"Oh, he goes to work, sir."

"For the night, I mean. Are you going to stay here until morning?"

"Yes, sir. If the policeman will admit of it."

The fellow's dialect was so strange that Kirk inquired, "Where did you come from?"

"Jamaica, sir. I was born on the north coast of the island, sir."

"Did you just arrive here?"

"Oh, Lard, no! I have been a liver here for two years. Sometimes I labor on the docks, again in the office. Last week I lost my position, and today my room is full. Landladies is bad females, sir, very common."

"Well, it seems we're in the same boat this beautiful evening. I have no place to sleep, either."

"Oh, chot me true, mon."

"I am chatting you true. I'm an outcast of fortune like yourself."

"Such talk! You make I laugh this house. Praise God, you h'appear like a gentleman."

"I trust this little experience will not permanently affect my social standing. By the way, what is your name?"

"E' Allan."

"Allan?"

"No, sir—h' Allan."

"Is that your first or last name?"

"Both, sir—h' Allan h' Allan."

"Mr. Allan Allan, you're unusually dark for a Scotchman," said Kirk gravely.

"Now, speaking to one gentleman to another, do you happen to know where we can get a hand-out?"

"And-out?" inquired the puzzled negro.

"Yes; a lunch. Can't you lead me to a banana vine or a breadfruit bakery? I'm starving. I must get something into my stomach—it's as flat as a wet envelope."

The Jamaican rose, saying: "Step this way, please. I know the place where a very good female is. Perhaps she will make us a present."

"How far is it?"

"Oh, not too far," Allan replied optimistically, and Kirk hopefully followed him.

But at the opposite side of the square they were halted by a sudden commotion which drove all thoughts of food out of their minds. From a building across the street issued a huge call, upon which an indescribable confusion broke forth. Men began running to and fro; a voice in authority shouted orders, each of which was the signal for another huge call. Through the wide open doors the Panamanians could be heard scurrying around a hose cart, apparently in search of clothes.

"Oh, look, boss!" Allan cried quickly.

"There must be a 'bargation'."

"It's a Spitznagel house, company, as I live. Come out."

Already a glare could be seen above the crowded portion of the city, and the two set off in that direction at a run, leaving the huge stream still writhing with their uniforms. They had nearly reached the fire when around a corner back of them, with frightful speed and clamor, came a modern automobile fire truck, gliding to which was a swarm of little brown men in red shirts and helmets. Without a pause the Yankee machine whizzed on up the street, its long clanging, its occupants holding on for dear life, the peaceful inhabitants of Colon fleeing from its path.

Kirk and his guide fell in behind and jogged to the scene of the conflagration.

A three-story building was already half gutted. Out of its windows roared long, fiery tongues. The structure snapped and volleyed a chorus to the sullen monotone of destruction. The street was littered with the household belongings of the neighborhood. On all sides was a hellish which the arrival of the firemen only augmented. The fire captains shouted orders to the sailors, the buglers blew feebly upon their horns, the companies deployed in obedience to the buglers. Then everybody yafled for further directions.

Again the trumpet sounded, whereupon each fireman began to interfere with his neighbor. A series of quarrels arose as couplings were made or broken. Then, after an interminable delay, water began to flow as if by a miracle; but, except in rare instances, it failed to reach the flames. A ladder truck, drawn by another excited company, now rumbled upon the scene, its arrival adding to the general disorder. Meanwhile the steadily trade wind fanned the blaze to ever growing proportions.

"Why the devil don't they get closer?" Kirk inquired of his Jamaican companion.

"Oh, Lard, my God, it is too hot, sir, greatly too hot. It would take a stout heart to do such a thing."

"No sense! They'll never put it out this way, hey?" Kirk attracted the attention of a nearby nozzlemaster. "Walk up to it. It won't bite you." But the valiant fire-fighter held stubbornly to his post, while the stream he directed continued to describe a graceful curve and sputter upon the sidewalk in front of the burning building. "You're spoiling that old woman's bed," Anthony warned him, at which a policeman with drawn club forced him back as if resentful of criticism.

For perhaps ten minutes there was no further change in the situation. Then a great shout arose as it was seen that the roof of an adjoining building had burst into flame. At this the fanfare of trumpets sounded again. Firemen rushed down the street, dragging a line of hose and drenching the onlookers. But, despite their hurry, they failed to reach the blazing roof.

By now the heat had grown really intense, and the more hardy heroes in the vanguard retreated to less trying positions. The voice of the crowd had arisen to a roar rivaling that of the flames.

Kirk pointed to the nearest fireman, "If he'd get up under that wall he could save the roof and be out of the heat. I can't stand this. Let's give him a hand, Allan."

"Very well, sir."

"Here! Help me get a kink in this hose. There! Now you hold it until you feel me pull." Kirk forced his way out through the crowd to find the fireman holding the nozzle, from which a feeble stream was dribbling, and mechanically directing it at the fire.

Kirk laid hold of the canvas and, with a heave, dragged it along with its rightful guardian ten feet forward. But there had been no bugle blown or order for this, and the disformed man pulled backward with all his might, chattering at Kirk in Spanish.

"Well, then, let go," Anthony shook the Panamanian loose, then ran forward across the street until he brought up at the end of the slack and felt the hose behind him writhe and swell as Allan released his hold. The next instant the negro was at his side, and the two found themselves half blistered by the heat that rolled out upon them. But the newly ignited roof was within range, and the stream they played upon it made the shingles fly.

The fireman they had despoiled began to drag at the hose from a safe distance, but when Kirk made as if to turn the nozzle upon him he scampered away amid the jeers of the crowd. A few moments later the American felt a hand upon his arm and saw an angry policeman who was evidently ordering him back. Behind him stood the excited nozzlemaster with two companions.

"He says you should return the hose where you found it," Allan translated.

"Leave us alone," Kirk replied. "You fellows help the others. We'll attend to this." More rapid words and exclamations followed, in the midst of which a dapper young man in a uniform somewhat more impressive than the others dashed up, flung himself upon Anthony and endeavored to wrench the hose from his hands. Meanwhile he uttered epithets in broken English which the other had no difficulty in understanding. Kirk promptly turned the nozzle upon him, and the full force of Colon's water pressure struck him squarely in the stomach, doubling him up like the kick of a mule. Down the newcomer went, then half rolled, half slid across the street as the stream continued to play upon him.

"I guess they'll keep away now," laughed Kirk, as he turned back to his self-appointed task.

But an instant later a half dozen policemen advanced in a businesslike manner, and their leader announced, "Come, you are under arrest!"

"Inched—what for? We're doing a lot of good here."

"Come, quick!"

"Oh, Lard, my God!" Allan mumbled. "I shall die and kill myself!"

"They won't do anything to us," Kirk assured him. "I've been pinched lots of times. We'll have to quit, though, and that's a pity. It was just getting good."

He surrendered the hose to a fireman, who promptly retreated with it to a discreet position, then followed his captors, who were now buzzing like bees.

"Don't get excited," he said to Allan, noting his frightened look. "They'll turn us loose all right."

But a moment after they were clear of the town he was surprised to see that the negro's captors had snapped "come alongs" upon him in spite of his repeated promises to go quietly. These handcuffs, Kirk saw, were of the type used upon desperate criminals, consisting of chains fitted with handles so contrived that a mere twist of the officer's hand would cut the prisoner's flesh to the bone. The men on each side of the Jamaican twisted stoutly, forcing the black boy to cry out in pain. He hung back, protesting:

"All right, sir, I'll come. I'll come."

But again they tightened their instruments of torture and their victim began to struggle. At this an evil faced man in blue struck him brutally upon the head with his club, then upon the shoulders, as if to silence his groans. The boy flung up his manacled hands to shield himself, and the light from a street lamp showed blood flowing where the chains had cut. The whole proceeding was so unprovoked, so sickening in its cruelty, that Kirk flew into a fury and, disregarding his own captors, leaped forward before the policeman could strike a third time. He swung his fist and the man with the club hurtled across the street, as if shot from a bow, then lay still in the gutter. With another blow he felled one of the handcuff men, but at the same time other hands gripped at him and he was forced to lay about vigorously on all sides.

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